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Another Rescue Mission

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The President himself had surrendered to a passage of gloom in the ashes of his Iran misadventure and Cy Vance's departure. "You seem to be snakebit," House Speaker Tip O'Neill commiserated over a leadership-breakfast. "Apparently you get a good hand and the dealer drops the deck." Carter seemed, in a silent glance, to agree. A spate of postraid polls showed that America cheered the rescue attempt and that Carter might in fact have arrested his downhill slide in public favor even though it failed. But he privately confessed surprise at the numbers—"You'd have thought it would have led to political rebellion"—and he felt obliged to consolidate his advantage before it evanesced like an April morning mist. Aides urged his news conference on him—pressed him to "jut his jaw out and bow his neck a little" and show the world he was in control. He stepped on camera with a visible gulp for air, steeled to explain why it was that *he* hadn't quit instead of Vance. The question never came.

He hoped that night to announce an end to his six-month hermitage in the White House, but he wasn't asked that either; the question had to be planted at a meeting with political friendlies the next day. The First Shut-in had by then slipped out of the Rose Garden twice to meet and thank the commandos he had sent off to Iran. One day, he traveled by unmarked car and helicopter to the CIA's supersecret Camp Perry near Williamsburg, Va., where he spoke with 150 of the raiders—and where, by some accounts, he and field commander Charlie Beckwith wept in one another's arms. Next day, he flew south to Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio, slipped on a surgical gown and mask, and visited the four men burned on the mission. On both visits, the President said, the men thanked him for sending them, apologized for failing and begged for a chance to try again.

Neither trip was overtly political, but Carter has now yielded to the arguments of his handlers that his Rose Gardening had long since outlived its usefulness to him or the hostages and that he must start running now to beat Ronald Reagan in the fall. Breaking away required him to do a rhetorical dance not unlike former Sen. George Aiken's proposal for ending the Vietnam war: declare it won and walk away.